



10 Things Your Bartender Won't Tell You

By Neil Parmar
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1. "It's my world; you're just drinking in it."

Back in the day, bartending was all about consistency and service. From the humblest watering hole to the fanciest hotel bar, bartenders knew how to mix a repertoire of classic cocktails just right every time, and the customer came first. Today, not so much. Ray Foley, author of *Bartending for Dummies*, says a growing number of the 500,000 working barkeeps in the U.S. are following the lead of celebrity chefs, hoping to make their mark with their own signature drinks. Sure, that means an explosion of creative cocktails dressed with such exotica as cucumber shavings or lavender foam. But good luck if you're in the mood for an old standard such as a sidecar.

The upshot? A lack of consistency, for one, says Tony Abou-Ganim, who created the Bellagio's cocktail program in Las Vegas. "I can go to the same bar, order the same thing from three different bartenders — and get three different drinks," he says. Even worse is customer service. Some bartenders have flipped the old equation, Foley says, putting 30% into pleasing customers and 70 into showcasing their personality: "The prime thing we're losing in the bar business right now is service for the customer."

2. "Your top-shelf pretensions are money in my pocket."

From wild-berry-infused vodka to the latest in Herradura tequila, liquor companies continue introducing high-end spirits as the consumer thirst for luxury goods trickles down to beverages. Last year sales of the most expensive brands of vodka, rum, tequila and scotch rose 18%, while those of the cheapest grew by less than 1%, according to the Distilled Spirits Council. But Tony Abou-Ganim warns, "A higher price doesn't always mean better quality." He notes, for example, that many bars now use lime-flavored powder in their cocktails, which can dilute subtler notes in an expensive spirit.

Another concern: scams involving "short pouring" and brand substitution that have ridden the luxury-spirits wave, according to Robert Plotkin, a beverage-management consultant. Say you order two premium cocktails. The bartender might pour only half a shot of alcohol into each — but he'll charge you for two, ring up just one and pocket the difference. Or you might be charged for a premium Cadenhead's rum that's actually a basic Bacardi. Your best defense: Sit at the bar, where you can see your drinks being made.

3. "Tabs are for suckers."

While visiting New York City two summers ago, Chris Romanowski started a tab at ESPN Zone for his family and friends. But once the air hockey ended and they paid the bill, they saw they'd been charged for 21 drinks despite having ordered only 13. Romanowski contested the charges and eventually got his money back. (Susan Abramson, regional marketing manager for ESPN Zone, says the Times Square establishment is under new management and that "we try to make sure [our guests] are satisfied at all times.")

"My advice would be to not run a tab," says Plotkin, who after 20 years behind the bar notes, "it's really easy to inflate tabs." For example, a bartender might give a buddy a free bottle of Heineken, then bury the charge in your bill, especially if you're with friends and not keeping track of who's ordered what. One of the most common ploys, according to Elizabeth Godsmark, author of *Controlling Liquor, Wine and Beverage Costs*, involves billing you for a round without breaking it down into separate charges. If you'd still rather run a tab than pay for drinks one at a time, be sure to get a receipt that specifies the number and cost of each drink.

4. "It's all about the bottom line — down to our choice of glassware."

Between 20% and 30% of booze served in a bar never gets paid for, due in large part to bartenders' overpouring their spirits. But management is cracking down and working every angle to curb this practice. In 2005, for instance, a study published in the *British Medical Journal* found that when bartenders were asked to free-pour a shot of liquor, they dumped an average 20% more into a short, wide tumbler than into a tall highball glass — even though they knew each held 12 ounces. And these weren't amateurs; they had, on average, nearly six years of experience. According to Brian Wansink, the Cornell University professor behind the study, bartenders are subject to an optical illusion that makes them gauge volume based more on the height of a glass than on width.

The industry jumped on the data: Immediately after the study was released, many bar owners and industry publications began advising managers to choose taller barware to save money while giving guests the impression they were getting more. So next time you want a stiffer drink at no extra cost, ignore what your eyes tell you and insist on a short glass.

5. "Fast service doesn't necessarily mean good service."

Much the way fast-food places use the three-minute rule, some bars now require that drinks be mixed, poured and at the

table within a certain time frame. And while you might enjoy faster service that way, it doesn't guarantee great-tasting drinks. In fact, it could mean the opposite. Clear cocktails, like the classic martini, should always be stirred carefully to achieve the right level of chill, says cocktail specialist Ted Haigh. But "bartenders are under pressure to make things faster," which is why "shaking has become ubiquitous."

Some drinks take so long to make that bartenders try to deter customers from ordering them. When Heather Leonard, a former bartender from New York City, used to muddle lime juice, mint and sugar for a mojito, she'd often hide it below the counter. "Once everyone sees you're making a mojito, they want one," she says. "And after 30 minutes you're four customers deep." The emphasis on speed can also lead to carelessness. In a rush, bartenders sometimes skip the tongs and jam barware into the ice machine — risking broken glass in your drink. So when a bar seems busy, you might want to order your liquor neat.

6. "This bar is filthy."

Most bars offer dim lighting for atmosphere — but it can also hide a lot of hazards. Slippery floors, sticky countertops and lemon wedges strewn about the floor are among the most common problems under cover investigators find in bars, according to Gwen Lennox, CEO of Keeping Tabs, which conducts independent evaluations for bar owners. Nightclubs frequented by twentysomethings tend to be the worst, she says, but it's not always easy to spot problems, such as open bottles of alcohol that haven't been cleaned or covered between shifts, thus encouraging the buildup of dust and germs.

Bars and taverns are just as susceptible to spreading food-borne illnesses as restaurants, warns Dean Peterson, director of environmental health for San Mateo County in California. Indeed, health-inspection reports for establishments connected to a bar cite all sorts of violations, ranging from dirty floors to lip-stained tumblers. One North Carolina inspector even found black-slime mold in an ice machine — though it might not make you sick, it "would be kind of repulsive to have in your drink," says Frances Breedlove, food sanitation section chief for Wake County.

7. "Restaurants are a terrible place to get a good drink."

Restaurants are a tough business. The majority of new establishments close their doors within the first three years, and only 30% last 10 years. One way to up the chance of turning a profit and running a successful restaurant is to secure a liquor license as soon as possible, since owners can expect to earn up to 40% of their profit from liquor. To further milk every drop of their drink sales, restaurants are micromanaging and automating their bartending wherever possible. By using so-called liquor-control systems, all a bartender needs to do is push a button to fill up, say, a pitcher of beer, thus saving time and controlling the pour to the letter; it even allows workers to serve another customer while the machine pours the next drink.

In a climate like this, "anyone can pretty much bartend," says Tara Clark, general manager of a restaurant and bar located just outside Atlanta, as long as they have a friendly personality. "If people don't get a great martini, as long as you can hold a great conversation, they'll forget about the drink," she says.

8. "I don't know diddly about wine."

You'd think a bar would be the perfect place to order a crisp chardonnay. Think again. Experts say bars tend to minimize their wine offerings because the bulk of their sales come from spirits or beer. Some bar managers and their staff know so little about wine that they leave it up to distributors to develop their menu, even though these salespeople might get rewarded with free trips or other incentives to push certain brands, says Ty Wenzel, author of "Behind Bars: The Straight-Up Tales of a Big-City Bartender." That's why it's not uncommon for bars to limit their list to a single red and a single white offering. In fact, Wenzel says one trick she used to clear out old stock at her own bar was to pass off the house wine — a cheap cabernet — as a more exotic shiraz or syrah. "I couldn't believe they couldn't tell the difference," she says.

One way around the issue is to ask your bartender to show you the bottle and pour the wine in front of you. Also, keep in mind that if bottles are stored near a hot kitchen or displayed on a shelf where natural light can strike them all day, their contents can oxidize or begin to spoil, rendering even a decent wine undrinkable.

9. "Your drink costs whatever I say it costs."

When Alexandria Steppe wants a Corona from one of her favorite clubs in Asbury Park, N.J., she doesn't always know how much it's going to cost: During a recent visit, her beer was \$4 when her boyfriend ordered it, then \$6 when Steppe ordered one from the very same bartender later that night. What's more, there are three different bars in the club, and she's discovered that the bartenders in the back charge less for drinks than those who work closer to the front of the house. "I don't think it's fair, but there isn't much I can do about it," Steppe says.

While it's not uncommon for bars to feature certain specials like "ladies drink free," many bartenders will go one step further, charging different rates to different people, particularly if a patron appears drunk. "What it usually means is that the bartenders are playing fast and loose, and they're probably not putting all of the money into the register," says Lennox. The best way to avoid getting overcharged is simple: Ask for a receipt, and let the manager know if you note a discrepancy.

10. "Unless you're using a walker, expect to be carded."

There's little logic when it comes to getting your I.D. checked these days. Some bartenders seem to have no qualms letting

underage drinkers run rampant, while others wait to see what a person orders before they ask for identification. A toasted-almond cocktail, for example, is often popular among teens, while folks who order a scotch on the rocks are typically assumed to be of drinking age. Then there are the places with tougher rules, where no one who appears under the age of 40 is allowed a drink until they've flashed their license. So no matter how old you are, or appear to be, carry your card at all times.

Even so, policing has become so strict at some places that even a valid I.D. isn't good enough. While waiting for a pool table to open up at a Dave & Buster's in Arcadia, Calif., last year, 29-year-old Jason Flores ordered a few rounds of vodka tonics with his friends. Once a table opened up and the optometrist started carrying his drink toward it, he was stopped and accused of having a fake I.D. Flores spent nearly half an hour trying to convince the management otherwise — going so far as offering to have the police come over and authenticate his I.D. In the end, the group was given permission to stay at the pool table, though no one was allowed to order or drink any more alcohol. Flores says this was after they had already paid for their drinks and tipped the bartender. Manager Steve White says he doesn't recall the situation, but notes that the bar hews close to the letter of the law, "which is extremely strict" when it comes to checking I.D. Cards can be considered suspect if they are cracked or torn or if the laminate has been peeled back.

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